

Narrative Technique in *The Good Soldier*

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In the dedicatory letter to Stella (Bowen) Ford, Ford Madox Ford wrote that, at a certain point in his life, he decided to put in a novel all he knew about writing to produce the Auk's egg of a career ordained to end at the age of forty. He was mistaken as far as his literary career was concerned, for many more books would be written in times to come. However, in the critics' appraisal *The Good Soldier* remains his swam song, his Auk's egg. In this work we can see the results of Ford's endless studies of the form of the novel, done alone or with Conrad during the years of their partnership, and it is generally agreed that, through its unity of form and substance, technique and theme, Ford reveals himself at his best.

The book is structurally divided into four parts. While this division has been frequently used by other novelists, in *The Good Soldier* it receives a different treatment since the parts are not arranged in a chronological order. The reasons for this rejection of chronological sequence are given by the first-person narrator, John Dowell, in part one, chapter two:

I don't know how it is best to put this thing down—whether it would be better to try and tell it from this distance of time, as it reached me from the lips of Leonora or from those of Edward himself. So I shall just imagine myself for a fortnight or so at one side of the fireplace of a country cottage, with a sympathetic soul opposite me.¹

By proposing to adopt this method of story-telling, Dowell and, by extension, Ford, also proposes to subordinate the narrative to the revelation of the moment, a fact that brings forth the violation of common conventions of structure and orderly arrangement of parts, for "when one discusses an affair, a long and sad affair — one goes back, one goes forward."² The novel, as Dowell talks reminiscently, moves back

and forth and from the vantage point of the present, the narrator proceeds to a reconstruction of the past.

This reconstruction is accomplished by means of impressions which flash through the narrator's mind. Thus, he first talks about some crucial events that took place in a very hot summer of 1904, in August, when he and his wife, Florence, met the Ashburnhams (Edward and Leonora) and also witnessed the death of Mrs. Maidan. In part two, Dowell shifts back further in time and gives the listener-reader a brief account of his life to the day of August 4, 1913, the date of Florence's death. After the unfolding of his own story, he goes back to Edward and Leonora Ashburnham in part three and recounts their lives to the autumn of 1913. In part four the remaining veils are lifted, and, with the revelation of the ultimate consequences of Florence's death, the narrative is brought to the present time again.

Although the narrative appears inconsecutive and vague in outline, as Dowell himself points out, "I have, I am aware, told this story in a very rambling way so that it may be difficult for anyone to find his path through what may be a sort of maze"³, it is not difficult for the reader to perceive that an internal relationship among the events, evoked in the narrator's mind, is the force that brings them together in his remembrance, even though they might have occurred at different points in the past. Dowell's central role in the novel is that of a "linking consciousness", that is, he holds the story together by connecting the various parts and imposing order on a conglomerate of impressions. Of course, this is also the problem for we don't quite trust his connections, and, throughout the narrative, we are called to make the necessary accommodations between Dowell's vision and our own.

Moving freely within two chronologically different plans of development, those of time present and time past, Dowell makes abundant use of free associations, while information

about the characters and their lives is given in bursts, through partial disclosures. He depicts the "four square coterie" as directed by his emotions, pausing randomly to dissect the lives of individuals, describing people and events according to the effect they have produced upon him. In doing so Dowell bestows upon the narrative method a realism of presentation harder to achieve by using conventional time-sequence patterns. The reader is confronted not with a detached omniscient narrator, but with a witness emotionally involved in what is being rendered by his memory.

To illustrate the process of free association mentioned above, let us first look into the passage on Peire Vidal, narrated in part one, chapter II. The occasion for the story is apparently the memory of Provence (a place beloved by Ford), where even "the saddest stories are gay". With the image of Provence in the background, Dowell invites his listener to "consider the lamentable story of Peire Vidal", but leaves the invitation floating in the air and suddenly starts talking about Florence and himself, two years before, motoring from Biarritz to Las Tours. Las Tours, he explains, was the way from France to Provence, and it was "poor dear Florence who wanted to go to Las Tours."⁴ From Las Tours and Florence, Dowell turns to the listener in an attempt to explain the reasons for his digressions: he is trying to show us the sort of life it was he and Florence led and the kind of woman she was. Of course, the explanation is not very enlightening and the listener-reader, who hasn't forgotten the opening invitation, is still left to wonder as to what all that has to do with the story of Peire Vidal. Proceeding on in his association, Dowell mentions Florence's aunt and the doctors who had advised him to keep his wife from any sort of excitement for fear that her heart would "cease to beat." Because of her "heart", his life had been transformed into that of the guardian of Florence's existence, and, in order to keep that "bright thing" in existence, it had been necessary to get

her interested in more "spiritual" matters, like culture. At this point, light is thrown on the first link in the chain, the story of Peire Vidal, for "his story is culture and I had to head her towards culture."⁵ Culture then works as the key symbol of his relationship with Florence, and everything related to culture is also related to him and Florence, the kind of life they led, what Florence was like. He is now ready to narrate the factual story of Peire, whose content in itself is meaningless to the plot, its sole importance coming from the fact that by meaning culture it somehow helps to explain Florence's and Dowell's mode of life; as we can notice, Dowell's mind works under some principle of inner logic, and the associations do not occur so gratuitously as we would suppose.

Gradual revelation becomes essential to the creation of effect made all-important in *The Good Soldier* because of the submission of the narrative to the narrator's mood. The significance of effect on a novel, short story or poem had already been anticipated by Edgar A. Poe in both his essay on "Philosophy of Composition" and his theory of short story contained in a review of Hawthorne's tales. According to Charles G. Hoffman, in composing *The Good Soldier*, Ford relies upon "progression d'effet", a theory of narrative progression developed by Conrad and Ford during their studies of the form of the novel. Hoffman quotes a passage from Ford in which he says that "in writing a novel we agreed that every word set on paper must carry the story forward and that, as the story progressed, the story must be carried forward faster and faster with more and more intensity."⁶

Indeed, if we stop for a moment to consider the way Florence's death is unfolded to the reader, we will have a good example of this "progression d'effet" at work: in the first chapter of part I, Dowell tells us that Florence and Captain Ashburnham are dead, suggesting that both have died from "heart problems". In part II, he gives an account of the events on the night of August 4, 1913, date of Florence's death,

mentioning a little phial that should have contained nitrate of amyl found empty in Florence's hands. Leonora's casual remarks in part III reveal that Florence's death was actually a suicide and that the empty phial had contained not nitrate of amyl but prussic acid. The prussic acid not only kills Florence but also reveals the falsehood of their mode of life. Dowell's failure to distinguish between a medicine and a poison suggests the character's inability to achieve a certain balance between possibilities which seem antithetical but which in fact supplement each other, such as, for instance, the pseudo-polarity reality-appearance. In part IV, it is finally shown that Florence's suicide eventually leads to Edward's suicide and Nancy's madness, thus completing the destruction of the "four square coterie". As we can feel, the revelation progressed both in terms of detail and emotional content until in the last focus Florence's death is shown in its broader significance to the lives of those left behind. Most important of all, the effect produced by this gradual and non-sequential disclosure of the events reaches both the reader and the narrator, for Dowell is also telling the story to himself in an attempt to grasp the full meaning of the past and penetrate into its darkness.

The narrative pattern, that of shifting focus as if the events were being photographed, is reinforced in *The Good Soldier* by the image of "shuttlecocks". On the level of content, "shuttlecocks" is a word uttered by Nancy in her unconsciousness, and is interpreted by Dowell as the dramatic recollection of being "tossed backwards and forwards between the violent personalities of Edward and his wife"⁷ by a mind gone insane. Edward replaces "shuttlecocks" by the image of a "blooming parcel that someone didn't want to pay the postage on"⁸. But the idea of movement towards and away from is preserved carefully. On the level of form Dowell's impressions move around the "four square coterie" as a shuttlecock, or as a photographer's camera, freeing the narrative from horological time. After exposing one corner of the coterie, the magnifying lens is focused on another corner, then back again until the inti-

macy of the inhabitants of this coterie and their interrelationship are fully analysed. Whenever the lens is diverted to people like Mrs. Maindan and Nancy, it exposes them for what they mean to the four-member group. We must always have in mind, though, that the choice of viewpoint, length of exposure, size of focal opening are still controlled by the narrator.

As the novel comes to a close, the bits of information can be pieced together to provide a full picture of the "four-square coterie". This picture is finally completed in part IV and turns out to be one of ultimate despair: Edward is dead, Nancy has become a walking shadow which Dowell keeps from fading away, and Leonora is immersed in the task of propagating the human race. The final revelations are enlightening to the reader and relieve the tension in relation to the plot.

For Dowell, however, "the path through the maze" has not been found and in that respect the recollection has proved fruitless: the past has not shed any light upon the present. In the final chapter, talking about Nancy in her madness, he refers to her pretty face as a "picture without a meaning". Ironically, after having photographed the recesses of his memory in the search for the truth, all there is left for Dowell is also a "picture without a meaning". Dowell's problem is that he cannot reach any satisfactory conclusion as to the relation between appearances and realities, love-hatred, reason-feelings, spirit-flesh. Entrenched in his manicheism, he refuses to accept the mixed nature of life and man and remains at a loss trying to extract coherence from ambiguity. The maze is the truth, but Dowell's mind cannot comprehend that. The reader alone receives the illumination.

In line with the design of the narrative, the last paragraphs in the books do not resemble a conventional conclusion. They only give details of an already familiar event

(Edward's death), prior to other events which have already been accounted for. This formal inversion, I think, has a two-fold purpose: on the one hand, it is meant to reflect Dowell's bewilderment, his sense of inconclusiveness, of "still not knowing". On the other, it may imply that there is not such a thing as a resolution of facts. The end contains the beginning and the middle, making formal distinctions among the parts unnecessary.

Footnotes

¹Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 12.

²Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*, p. 183.

³Madox Ford, p. 183.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶Charles G. Hoffman, "My Great Auk's Egg" in *Ford Madox Ford* (New York, Twayne Publishers, 1958), p. 75.

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